

THE MASKED TWAREKS.¹

THE Twareks, in common with other African tribes which live in the northern half of Africa, have long been an object of curiosity and interest to European scholars and travellers, but in spite of all the researches which have been made into the history of their origin and language, many problems concerning them remain unsolved to the present time. One thing about them is certain, which is that they have made their name to become a real terror among the peoples who live on the borders of their country, and although they inhabit a region which is estimated by Mr. Harding King to be as large as Russia, and are, indeed, a nation which will have to be reckoned with one day by civilised nations, no systematic attempt has been made to collect facts about and statistics of their country and its resources.

There are many theories about the origin of the Twareks, but it is not easy to pin one's faith to any of them absolutely. They belong undoubtedly to the Berber race, and live in the wild places of the Sahara, *i.e.* the great "rocky" region which lies to the south of Algeria; they never come near civilised peoples if they can help it, and they only approach caravans belonging to other tribes in order to plunder them and to kill their owners. The track of their raids may be easily followed throughout the Sahara by means of the groups of graves and sepulchral monuments which they have scattered over the whole face of that dreary region of rock, sand, and sun, and the frequency with which such monuments are found suggests only too clearly the multitude of bloody raids which have to be laid at their door. They have one custom which distinguishes them from their neighbours, *i.e.* the men keep their faces covered by a mask, and they hide their features by these means even from the members of their own family circle.

To interview members of the Twarek tribe and to take photographs of their faces were the chief objects which Mr. Harding King had in view when he made his journey of about six hundred miles into their country, and the volume before us, which gives a full account of his travels, is extremely interesting reading. We need not here refer to the earlier part of the book, which describes the preparations he made for his journey, for they are familiar to everyone who has tramped the desert in any part of the East, especially in northern Africa and the Sûdân, and we therefore pass on to the latter half of the narrative. The principal places which Mr. Harding King passed on his way were Saada, Bir Jeffir, Shegga, Mraier, Sidi Amran, Tougourt, Hassi, Mamar, and his travels in a southerly direction ended at Wargla; on his way back he struck off to the east at Tougourt, and, having visited Gomar El-Wad and Edemeetha, he turned to the north-west and directed his steps to Shegga, where he joined the road on which he had set out from Biskra.

¹ "A Search for the Masked Twareks." By W. J. Harding King. Pp. viii+334; with forty-one illustrations and a map. (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1903.) Price 12s. 6d.

Tougourt, though a most interesting place to see and examine for a short time, is not a healthy one to live in, and no one will blame a traveller for leaving it as soon as possible; it is an important market town, and possesses a mosque, of the interior of which Mr. Harding King gives an excellent view. Wargla, which marks the limit of our traveller's journey, was, and still is, a town of importance, but since the slave trade has been suppressed, and the large trading caravans from the south now dispose of their wares in Morocco and Tripoli, it has lost much of its wealth and position. The streets of Wargla are open to the sky, and the houses are well built and usually fairly well kept. There is a French fort here, in one of the walls of which is a monument to the brave men who fell in the luckless expedition of Colonel Flatters into



FIG. 1.—Wargla. (From "A Search for the Masked Twareks.")

the Sahara. The Twareks were, of course, at the bottom of the mischief, but they were no doubt helped by the Senussi, who will, if we mistake not, give trouble in northern Africa when they find the fitting opportunity. The founder of the Senussi, Sayyid Muhammad bin 'Ali es-Senussi, was born about 1808 at Mostaganem and died in 1859, and at the present moment his followers form one of the most powerful religious and political confederacies in northern Africa; had they joined the late Mahdi at Khartûm and supported his rebellion with troops, the result of the British expedition would have been very different.

On his return journey Mr. Harding King heard with delight that about half a dozen tents of the Twareks were pitched near Edemeetha, for if he could but manage to get their owners to receive him

and to unveil their faces, the object of his travels would be attained. As soon as possible he set out for the Tawarek tents, and he was fortunate enough not only to be received, but to be invited to take snuff with them. He found that "they were all filthily dirty," for no true Tawarek ever washes. Such ablutions as are necessary for religious purposes are performed with sand or stone; occasionally, with the view of improving his appearance, he rubs himself with indigo. Mr. Harding King found that his hosts all had "thick, purring voices," a shifty manner, and large, lustrous, furtive eyes. By and by some of them lifted their "lithams," and so exposed the upper part of their faces, and he saw that some were white skinned, some very dark, and "their aquiline noses showed that no trace of a negro stain was present in their blood."

"Tifinagh," and they derived it from the Berbers; it may be descended from the old Libyan, but it is unlikely to be of any very great antiquity, and if it has any very close affinity with the Libyan characters on the Tugga Stone, which was set up by Atabâ, the son of Yaphmatath, and which is now in the British Museum, it is not very much older, probably, than B.C. 400. Mr. Harding King's narrative is very readable and modest, and is well illustrated by many good reproductions of photographs; it cannot be regarded as a scientific exposition of Tawarek lore, but it contains a great deal of knowledge collected at first hand by one who has no "axe to grind," and is therefore of value.



FIG. 2.—A Tawarek Noble. (From "A Search for the Masked Tawareks.")

After a little time he was allowed to wander round their camp, and eventually succeeded in obtaining two photographs of a group of his hosts. A day or two later Mr. Harding King paid a second visit to the Tawareks, and good fortune enabled him to photograph a number of women in their tents; he found their hands small and neat, with long tapering fingers, their arms "the prettiest imaginable," their wrists "beautifully rounded," &c.; finally, the young Tawarek who was outside the tent removed his veil, and our traveller was rewarded by being allowed to take the photograph of which an excellent reproduction faces p. 315.

In a short appendix Mr. Harding King repeats a number of usually accepted statements about the Tawarek alphabet, but, naturally, contributes few new or startling facts. The Tawareks call their alphabet

much is here recorded of them that it would appear certain that the whole origin, meaning, and ramifications of these societies could be unravelled by a careful investigator with time and money at his disposal. "Sâss stick," the *mwavi* of British Central Africa, is still used in the protectorate, and we well remember the long journey made by us into the bush in search of the tree, which we found almost completely denuded of bark, showing that it was much in use. As the author points out, the subject of native medicine is still neglected, and although there are botanical gardens at Freetown and Songo, Aburi (Gold Coast) and at Lagos, we should be surprised to learn that any contribution to this subject ever came out of them.

¹ "The Advance of Our West African Empire." By C. Braithwaite Wallis. Pp. xv+318. (London: Fisher Unwin, 1903.) Price 2s.